

Urbs Sancti Petri revisited

Myles Burnyeat

Two years ago I wrote a short report for this journal (*Omnibus* 24, Sept. 1992) about the Classical Gymnasium which had recently opened in Leningrad, now St Petersburg. In September last year (1993) I was back in St Petersburg, watching the procession to celebrate the beginning of the new school year.

Such celebrations are traditional for Russian schools. Not so usual is the form it takes at this school: the headmaster leads the procession on a horse, waving aloft the school banner, while the pupils follow on foot, the girls carrying flowers, the boys dressed as Roman soldiers in cardboard armour. The spectators were mainly parents and teachers, who include several Classics Professors from the University.

When the procession reached the school building – newly painted and spacious inside, although the ground floor is temporarily occupied by a Rudolf Steiner school run on very different principles – the headmaster dismounted and the pupils lined up to form a welcoming corridor on either side of the doorway. The welcome was for the new entry of 11-12 year olds. One by one, as the headmaster introduced them by name, they walked through the corridor of older children into the school where they will spend the next six years working to a syllabus centred upon Latin, ancient Greek, and mathematics.

Speeches were made. A spokesman for the funding authority (both schools in the building are financed by the city) congratulated them on their reputation as the best school in St Petersburg. Invited to give a speech of welcome from Cambridge, I told them that their reputation had reached, by way of *Omnibus*, to enthusiasts for the Classics in British schools, and that at a time when opportunities for studying Latin and Greek were diminishing throughout Western Europe, they were an inspiration to the world.

In response, they asked for some copies of *Omnibus* to be sent to them – both because it would be interesting to read about Classics in British schools, and because it would be useful in English lessons. And they suggested that, in return, readers of *Omnibus* might be interested to see the school timetable as set out in the advertisement offered to prospective parents.

The advertisement is a single sheet of paper. No Russian school has the resources for a glossy brochure. Some of the figures in the draft timetable are entered in ink, and the columns do not always add up. It is indeed a draft, an expression of hope as well as intent.

But it is also a claim to achievement. The school has been running for two years now, and applications greatly outnumber the places available.